

Where Should Your Story Happen?



Choosing a setting sometimes happens at the inspiration stage—"I want to write a book set in Hawaii." Other times, the character or plot comes first and you struggle to figure out the right place to tell that story. And for many genre writers, the setting and world appear long before they realize what story will be told in that world. Here are some questions to help you narrow down the perfect world in which to set your story.

1. Is your main story world real or fictional?

- ☐ **Real.** I plan on spending time in these locations or doing deep research to make sure I get the facts right.
- ☐ **Fictional.** I want freedom to dictate the rules and norms of my story world.
- ☐ **Both real and fictional.** Part of my story is set in the world we know but we'll also be exploring new worlds and created aspects of that world (common to fantasy).

2. Does your protagonist know the main story world or are they new to it?

If the main story takes place in a small town, but your character is from the big city, then they are new to the story 'world' of small town. But if the main character is the one showing the city slicker the ropes, they would be considered a local.

☐ **My protagonist does not know the main story world.**

The world is new to my protagonist. The reader will learn the norms of the culture through the trials and errors of my main character as they adapt. *(This makes it easier to pick a place you don't completely know because you as the writer will be learning the norms as you explore or research.)*

☐ **My protagonist is from the main story world.**

My protagonist has a deep understanding of this world, how it works, and their place in it. My main character will navigate with ease what is unfamiliar to the reader. *(This may be best for a world that you as a writer know extremely well or have spent lots of time researching/developing.)*

3. What kinds of settings are essential to your story?

Think about each setting as having a job to do. The place where the meet-cute happens. The seedy underground lair where the showdown occurs. The contaminated lakefront that underscores the environmental theme. If there's something critical your story needs to convey, identify the place that will best reflect or support that.

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4. What settings are common to your genre?

Westerns, for example, typically include the town square and the local saloon. Do you want familiar settings or completely unexpected locales? Maybe a compromise with a slight twist to what's expected.

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5. What places do you know best?

Make a list of the places you know like the back of your hand. Your hometown; your favorite vacation spot; the park across the street—they can all serve as starting templates for settings in your story and give you specific details to make your story version of the place authentic. A favorite coffee shop, for example, could be the perfect spot for your characters to hang out, even if you have to imagine the Martian version of it.

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6. What mood or atmosphere do you want the story to have?

The atmosphere of a place bleeds into the story and could either enhance the mood or give all the wrong signals. Think about places you've been or would like to go that have the mood you're after.

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7. What locations could enhance the story's conflict and/or theme?

If your protagonist is struggling to overcome grief, setting the scene in a place that reminds them of their loss would make their problems harder to overcome. Brainstorm dramatic locations for key story moments.

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8. Go back through and circle the locations that stand out.

Go with your gut and don't overthink it. Which locations seem to gel together into a story world? Can you find a real place with some of these features? Is it someplace you know or will it take some embellishment?